

YOUR RELIGION

A Frank Discussion on Some Aspects of the Peyote Drug

By H. E. BRUCE



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by H. E. BRUCE

Indians are a deeply religious people. That is good!

Some Indians prefer to have their own church. You call it "The Native American Church." That is your privilege. The Constitution of the United States guarantees you the right to worship God in your own way.

I want you to know I have the utmost respect for your church and a feeling of genuine friendship for all its members. I shall always defend your right to worship God in your own church.

What I want to talk about now is your use of *peyote* in connection with your church ceremonies. Do not think I am going to try to interfere with your use of *peyote* as a church sacrament. I am not. But it is my duty to give you certain information about the effects of *peyote*. Then you will be in position to decide intelligently whether to continue using it or not. The Choice will be yours.

You will remember that for many years the Indian Service tried to stop the use of *peyote* by Indians. Everyone said it was bad.

When former Commissioner John Collier took office, however, he decided that *peyote* was used only as a sacrament in a religious service in the same way that white people use grape juice or wine as a symbol of Christ's blood in observing Holy Communion in the various other Christian denominations, and he ruled that the use of *peyote* in this way was protected by the Constitution and should not be interfered with.

I want you to know that *a new effort is being made now to have Congress outlaw the use of peyote!*

This movement is not on the part of missionaries. It is based on medical reports and recommendations of doctors who believe *peyote* to be harmful to the health of those who use it.

On November 26, 1948, the Secretary of the Interior released a report by a committee of prominent doctors appointed by the American Medical Association at the request of the Secretary of the Interior to investigate medical care of Indians in several mid-west states which included Minnesota, North and South Dakota, Montana and Wyoming.

I became acquainted with this committee last summer when they visited Turtle Mountain Consolidated Indian Agency in North Dakota while I was the Superintendent there. They were particu-

*This forthright statement on *peyote*, with special reference to its use as a medicine, was presented to the Winnebago and Omaha, Ponca and Santee Sioux Indians under the jurisdiction of the Winnebago Agency in Nebraska. Superintendent Bruce, himself a part-blood Winnebago, knows whereof he speaks; may his tribe increase!—Editors.

larly interested in getting information to show the need for larger appropriations for health work among Indians to enable the government to provide better facilities and equipment and more personnel to take care of sick Indians.

I am sure all of you will agree with doctors who propose better medical care for Indians.

This same committee of doctors recommended repeal of the Indian Liquor law on the ground that it is unenforceable and that an educational campaign to acquaint Indians with the evils of drinking to excess will be more effective in overcoming the evils of alcoholism. Most of you should agree with that conclusion also.

Then this committee of prominent doctors, whose chairman is associated with the well-known Mayo Clinic at Rochester, Minnesota, described peyote as a habit-forming drug which acts on the nervous system as a stimulant and narcotic and recommended that Congress pass a law to restrict the sale and possession of peyote.

I have had copies made of that part of the report mentioned above and they are attached. Read for yourselves what these doctors had to say!

Many other doctors who have studied the effects of peyote on their patients have been of the same opinion. I am also attaching the comments of Dr. Moorman P. Prosser, who engaged upon a special study of the effects of using peyote while serving as a Physician at the Central Oklahoma State Hospital at Norman, Oklahoma. These comments are quoted from an address Dr. Prosser made before a conference at Bacone College on June 7, 1939.

Note that Dr. Prosser closes with the statement that peyote should be labeled "Poison—Danger—Keep Away."

Doctors do not depend upon observation alone to determine the effect of a drug. They use chemistry to break down and analyze the elements of which it is composed. This has been done. I am also attaching for your information an excerpt from a report on the chemical analysis of peyote made by Dr. Austin Smith, Secretary of the Council on Pharmacy and Chemistry of the American Medical Association.

You will not understand the technical medical terms in which Dr. Smith's report is written, but you are free to take this comment to any doctor you choose. He can only tell you this is scientific proof of the evil effects of using peyote. Please note in particular that one of the elements of which peyote is composed "produce a number of other effects, including fall of blood pressure (prevented by vagotomy or atropine), motor paralysis by depression of the central nervous system and death by respiratory failure."

The Navajo tribe of Indians—largest tribe in the United States with 65,000 members—outlawed the use of peyote on the Navajo Reservation by resolution adopted by its tribal council June 3, 1940, by the overwhelming vote of 52 to 1. Both Commissioner Collier and the Secretary of the Interior approved this council action. A

copy of the resolution is attached so you may read it for yourselves.

Neither the Omaha nor the Winnebago Indians used peyote until about 40 years ago. It was unknown to your ancestors. It has no significance in your tribal traditions. You borrowed its use from other southwest tribes. Have any of you ever really tried to find out the truth about peyote to determine for yourselves whether it is good or did you just take another Indian's word for it?

The Mexicans in the Rio Grande Valley who gather peyote, sack it and sell it to Indians do not use it themselves. Did you know that? If peyote is good, wouldn't you think the Mexicans who sell it to the Indians would use it also?

The most dangerous feature of peyote is its use as a medicine. A few superstitious people still use it as a cure-all medicine for nearly every ailment with which the human body is afflicted. They even will jeopardize the health and lives of their children by giving them peyote in times of sickness. I have even known cases where babies choked and died from vomiting after being given peyote tea as a medicine.

To those people I can only say that doctors inform me that chemistry and pharmacy have been unable to find any property or element in peyote which will contribute to the curing of any disease. On the other hand they do find it to contain certain alkaloids which are both harmful and habit-forming.

While in Kansas, I made a 12 year study of the behavior and social tendencies of the users of peyote there. Here is what I found to be true:

Nearly all used liquor to excess also.

They were the group among which most crimes were committed, especially sex crimes such as rape and adultery. They were the ones who abused Indian custom marriage and divorce and evaded responsibility for the support of their children whenever possible.

Their health was far below the average of the rest of the Indians and many people in middle age had become physically unable to work because of heart trouble, high blood pressure, kidney and gall bladder diseases.

They did not encourage education among their children and juvenile delinquency among their children was high because of this.

None of them were successful farmers. Very few were successful in making a living at anything.

Many Superintendents of Indian agencies who compared information with me have told me they found the same tendencies to prevail among the Indians who use peyote on their reservations.

The encouraging thing in Kansas was the fact that only a relatively small number of Indians used peyote. In my judgment, the alarming thing here is the fact that peyote is used by 90% of the Omaha and over 50% of the Winnebago Indians.

I want to urge you to completely discontinue use of peyote

as a medicine.

If you continue its use as a sacrament in your church, why not limit each worshipper to one peyote button at each service? One small container of grape juice or wine is all the worshipper gets as a sacrament in any other Christian church.

If any church should start using wine as a sacrament, serving glass after glass all night long until many of the worshippers were drunk, you can be positive the law would step in and put a stop to such an abuse without respect to the freedom of worship provisions of the Constitution.

Let me make another suggestion. Doctors insist that the loss of a night's sleep regularly every so often is detrimental to health. It takes a very strong physique to stand up under the punishment of this loss of sleep which is certain in time to break down our resistance to disease. Why not protect the health of the members of the Native American Church by voluntarily limiting the length of its service to a period of not more than two or three hours?

These are suggestions for your consideration.

Remember this—if Congress decides to prohibit the use or possession of peyote, it will be because many Indians have abused the use of it.

It seems to me that Indians have tried to cling to native religions in an effort to preserve their identity as Indians and to prevent the white man's culture from swallowing them up completely. I think we who have Indian blood should preserve our art, our music, our dances, our legends, our tribal history and traditions.

I see no harm in our having our own strictly Indian church. But when we do, why should we poison a good thing by use of a harmful, habit-forming drug which learned men of scientific knowledge tell us is dangerous?

On the other hand, why should we resist the very best part of the white man's culture which is his religion the missionaries offer to share?

A religion which makes people live better lives is good—one which does not help us to live better is not so good. In every community in which I have lived and worked, I have observed that the Indians who regularly attend the services of the churches established by Christian missionaries are the happiest, most law-abiding, helpful and successful members of the tribe. Your missionaries are college trained men qualified by many years of study and experience to help you to harmonize your daily lives with the will of your Creator. They work for your good every day of the week. Their friendship and help can mean a great deal to each of you.

These are my honest convictions. I shall not try to force any one to do as I believe he should. I can only suggest for your benefit. The choice is wholly yours.

Sincerely yours,

H. E. BRUCE, *Superintendent*

What the Doctors Say

Exhibit "A"

The following comment and recommendations are quoted from a report released by the Secretary of the Interior November 26, 1948, covering a survey of medical care among the upper midwest Indians made in the summer of 1948, by a committee appointed by the American Medical Association, consisting of the following doctors:

Dr. A. J. Chesley, Secretary and Executive Officer of the Minnesota State Board of Health,

Dr. B. J. Branton, former President of the Minnesota State Medical Association and Director of the Willmar (Minnesota) Clinic,

Dr. W. F. Braasch, Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minnesota.

"Alcoholism.—As has just been indicated, one of the menaces to the health of Indians is the unfortunate addiction to alcoholic excess which is common to the males among them, particularly those of the younger generation. The excessive use of alcohol is a menace to both physical and moral health and a serious obstacle to progress. Temptation to illegal use of liquor, and difficulties in procuring it, act as incentives to its use. The laws prohibiting the sale of alcoholic beverages to Indians are so easy of circumvention that they are worthless and it would be much better to abolish them. An educational program, including audio-visual means of showing the havoc, both physical and moral, resulting from intoxication, would be helpful.

"Drug habits.—The drug most frequently used by the Indian is peyote ("mescal button") which is obtained from the tops of a small, narcotic cactus grown in the Rio Grande section of the United States and in Mexico. It is eaten by the Indian tribes of the Southwest in religious ceremonials, for the sense of well-being which it induces and to promote trances and hallucinations. The use of peyote has been a problem among Indians for many years. It has gradually spread so as to involve many of the Indians in the Northwest. Unfortunately, the Indian Bureau permitted use of peyote among the Indians several years ago on the grounds that it was part of an Indian religious ceremony. We are informed by the Narcotics Bureau of the United States Treasury Department that peyote is not covered by the Harrison Narcotic Act but that its use is prohibited by law in some of the southwestern states. It is high time that the sale and possession of this drug be restricted by a national law. It is a habit-forming drug and acts on the nervous system as a stimulant and narcotic. The drug usually is taken prior to festival dances and causes excessive stimulation for several hours. The following day the addict is left in an exhausted condition and is incapable of physical exercise or labor."

* * *

Exhibit "B"

Dr. Moorman P. Prosser, then Physician at the Central Oklahoma State Hospital at Norman, Oklahoma, spoke June 7, 1939, at a conference at Bacone College, Muskogee, Oklahoma, and told of a special study he had made of the effects of using peyote. The following is quoted from his address on that occasion:

"I feel that we are all agreed that the habitual or excessive use of any drug is harmful. The degree of harm which is done, however, depends not only upon the type of drug which is taken, but also upon the type of person who takes it. Not only will a single drug affect different persons in varying manners and degrees; a single drug will also affect the same individual differently upon varying occasions. And so it is with peyote, a drug derived from the cactus 'Lophophora Williamsii.' Primarily it appears to affect the mind of its user, but it also impairs the normal functions of the body. The greatest havoc wreaked by the drug is the deterioration of personality, the lowering of moral standards, the impairment of social consciousness, and the loss of economic independence observed in the chronic addict. Ob-

viciously these changes harm not only the peyote user himself, but they have an injurious and degrading effect upon community and society as a whole.

"Peyote is usually employed in a ritualistic ceremony, during which the men of the Indian village eat twenty to forty of these buttons during a single night, and obtain a bizarre and weird sensation from its use. Many peyote addicts, however, do not limit its use to the period of the ceremonial, but use it constantly for its effects. Such addicts carry a supply in their pockets and nibble on it whenever they hear the cry of their addiction.

"Peyote has been and is still used as a medicine by many tribes, being given as a panacea for any and all illnesses. It is brewed into a tea and fed to the children; it is poulticed upon a sore or rheumatic joint; small doses are given to women in childbirth; and it is nibbled by men and women alike for a toothache, a stomach ache, or an aching corn. Truly, it is in the varieties of its usage that its greatest danger lies, for thus a great many Indians learn of its psychic effects, and become potential addicts.

"When taken internally, peyote at first produces an irritation and excitement of the brain manifested by a feeling of contentment, well being, and a friendly attitude toward the world in general. As the degree of intoxication increases, hallucinations appear, and the user sees visions which may be pleasant or unpleasant, depending upon the state of his sub-conscious and conscious mind. The only consistent feature of these visions is the presence of brilliant colors and bright flashes of light, indicating that the back portion of the brain has been violently irritated.

"Other phenomena proving that the brain has been inflamed and irritated as in alcoholic intoxication are the loss of balance, the staggering gait, the poor muscular coordination, and the disturbed reflexes of the man who is 'drunk' upon peyote. Muscular activity and tone are depressed, the heart's action is weakened and impaired, and the organs of excretion are injured and sometimes violently disturbed by the task of eliminating the drug from the system.

"Certainly the addict to peyote, like the addict to alcohol, is intoxicated, or poisoned. And who will deny that repeated intoxication is harmful to the human body, the human mind, and to society?

"Like alcohol, peyote offers its apostles an escape from the realities of life, but hidden in its fragrance of fantasy lie the thorns of ill health, mental deterioration and economic failure. Like alcohol, peyote offers temporary relief from difficult and oppressive problems. Like alcohol, it solves no problem whatsoever, but merely creates more difficulties for its addict to face when the effect of the drug wears off. Moral, social, and economic standards suffer through its use, and it should be labeled 'Poison—Danger—Keep Away.'"

* * *

Exhibit "C"

The following is quoted from a report to Dr. W. F. Braasch, Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minnesota, by Dr. Austin Smith, Secretary of the Council on Pharmacy and Chemistry of the American Medical Association, and relates to the chemical analysis of peyote:

"According to Sollman (Manual of Pharmacology, 1948) peyote (mescal buttons) consists of the tops of a small narcotic cactus, *Lophophora Williamsii* (formerly *Anhalonium lewinii*) which grows in the Rio Grande region of the United States and Mexico. It is dried and eaten by the Indian tribes of the southwest in religious ceremonies, for the sense of well-being which it induces and sometimes to promote trances and hallucinations. The following excerpts from Sollman's book may be of interest:

"The cactus contains eight alkaloids structurally related to hordenine and the epinephrine series. . . . Several are sedative. The most important is Mescaline . . . which produces peculiar psychologic disorientations, with hallucinations of the special senses, particularly flashes and lines of ever-changing brilliant colors . . . Mescaline and its related compounds produce a number of *other effects*, including fall of blood pressure (prevented

by vagotomy or atropine), motor paralysis by depression of the central nervous system and death by respiratory failure (G. S. Grace, 1934).”

* * *

Navajo Tribal Council Speaks Up Exhibit “D”

On June 3, 1940, the tribal council of the Navajo Tribe of Indians adopted a resolution outlawing peyote in all Navajo country where some 65,000 Indians reside. This action was taken by the overwhelming vote of 52 to 1, and was approved by Commissioner of Indian Affairs John Collier and the Secretary of the Interior in January, 1941. The contents of this resolution are quoted below:

* * *

“RESOLUTION NO. CJ-40 To prevent the introduction in or use of peyote on the Navajo Reservation

WHEREAS, during the last few months great quantities of peyote have been brought into the Navajo Reservation, and
WHEREAS, its use is not connected with any Navajo religious practice and is in contradiction to the traditional ceremonies of the Navajo people;
THEREFORE: BE IT RESOLVED that as far as the Navajo people are concerned peyote is harmful and foreign to our traditional way of life,
BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the introduction into the Navajo country or the use of peyote by the Navajo people be stamped out and appropriate action be taken by the Tribal Courts to enforce this resolution;
BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that there be added to the Code of the Tribal Offenses, approved by the Secretary of the Interior on June 2, 1937, the following section: “Any person who shall introduce into the Navajo country, sell, use or have possession within said Navajo country the bean known as peyote shall be deemed guilty of an offense against the Navajo tribe, and upon conviction thereof shall be sentenced to labor for a period not to exceed nine months, or a fine of \$100.00, or both;
BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that any person having a peddler’s license who is found trafficking in peyote shall, in addition to the above sentence, have his peddler’s license forever cancelled.
BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Tribal Council hereby petition Congress to enact a law to supplement the above addition to the Code of Tribal Offenses to the end that peyote shall never be permitted in the Navajo country.

CERTIFICATION

I hereby certify that the foregoing resolution was passed this 3rd day of June, 1940, by a 52 to 1 vote of the Navajo Tribal Council in assembly at Window Rock, Arizona, at which a quorum was present.

(Signed) J. C. Morgan
Chairman, Navajo Tribal Council

WITNESSED:
(Signed) Howard Gorman
Vice-Chairman, Navajo Tribal Council”